

FORCED LABOUR IN UKRAINE

At the end of September 1942, Jewish men between the ages of 21 and 45 were mobilised from occupied Bačka and the whole of Hungary into labour gangs and taken by force to the eastern front, to the River Don. There, under the command of pathologically cruel Hungarian officers and non-commissioned officers, SS men and gendarmes, they were subjected to brutal torture. They worked on clearing minefields and lives were lost to exploding mines, they died of cold, hunger, typhus, beatings, they were killed for no particular reason, for nothing, for a pair of decent shoes.

Only two or three per cent of the men taken from Sombor survived and the testimonies which follow are from three of those. The memory of the martyrs who perished and the extent of this little known tragedy again oblige us to publish these testimonies.

These survivors of the Sombor Jews mobilised into labour gangs speak about their memories of that tragedy, of the hundreds who were killed or died. These accounts were dictated to Milenko Beljanski and originally published as an appendix to Sombor Jews (1735–1970)¹.

¹ *Somborski Jevreji (1935–1970)*, Milenko Beljanski, in *Zbornik 4* (Anthology 4), publ. Jevresjki istorijski muzeji, Beograd 1979 (in Serbian). pp. 47–50.

ZOLTAN BRAJER, pensioner:

“On July 1, 1942, the occupying forces ordered the mobilisation of Jews from Bačka and Szegedin. They rounded us up in Bačka Topola and grouped us into seven companies. There were at least two hundred people in each and the companies were numbered from 105/8 to 105/14. They drove us to Erdelj and the occupied part of Slovakia. We did the worst kind of work under constant military escort and guard.

[...]

“I was a member of the 105/10 company in which there were 214 of us. As far as I know, four of us stayed alive. The others were killed at the eastern front by the Fascists and people also died in massive numbers in Soviet camps because of the typhus epidemic. But, to return to the course of events, our company was driven to Erdelj, to Mištotfalu. They made us build an airport on a piece of rocky land. That is where the swearing, the slapping and the beatings began. From there we moved to Košice in Slovakia. On September 1, 1942, they sent us to the Russian front. The trip took twenty days in wagons and ten days of walking. From Ostrogorsk we were sent to Koški, in no man’s land, to dig ditches, set up barbed wire, make machine-gun nests. Lieutenant Nikler, the head of the company, fled because of illness. His replacement was a brutal staff sergeant, Kakonji, because Second Lieutenant Janos Vashegyi had fled.

“The Russian winter struck us on October 17 and became even harsher on November 6. We were given a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Janos Hortobagy. He really finished off the Jews. He stood in front of us and told the soldiers that he wanted to spend the Christmas holidays with his family, and that if the soldiers wanted the same thing they should know that it wouldn’t happen as long as the Jews were alive. After this the guards really unleashed their sadistic behaviour. They tortured, struck, beat and killed whoever they could whenever they could. From Ribalcin we were moved to Kamenka. It was winter, forty degrees Celsius below zero. There were now a hundred of us left in the original company of 214. The guards, the Hungarian

gendarmes who had come along, stripped us naked. They stole everything we still had, whatever we'd saved or hidden. They took wedding rings, rings, watches, knives, warm underwear. By the end of December ninety of our friends were among the dead. Many people barely dragged themselves along, walking with difficulty. The company was down to 99 in number. These were the ones who could still walk.

“On January 14, 1943, orders were received to retreat. I had earlier tried to save myself with the help of a Russian woman, but she had been very suspicious. I noticed that an elderly and rather shabby man, looking like a beggar, was visiting her house. In the end the Russian woman told me to come to her house in the evening. Who should I see there but the old man! And then he began questioning me, interrogating me in High German! Who was I, what was I where did I come from, what languages did I speak, how did I come to be at the front? He told the Russian woman to put me in the cellar. Three days later the advance contingent of the Red Army arrived. I emerged from my spot, got a pass from the Soviet unit and almost made it. Because the people who arrived in a wave after the breakthrough of the Stalingrad front didn't have the slightest idea about me or my meetings with the Soviet troops, they told me that I didn't need a *bumashka*.

“I found myself in a column of captured German, Hungarian and Romanian soldiers and ended up with them in the prison camp in Hrenovoy. The cold, the hunger and terror I went through, the typhus, all of it devastated the camp. There were about 40,000 prisoners. There I also met Yugoslav Communists, Partisans who, like the prison units, had also been driven to the eastern front by the Hungarian authorities. They wore yellow armbands with black patches. I remember Ljubiša Protić, from Bačka Petrovac, and Julije Spevak, from a place called Usta, north of Nižnji Novgorod. There I asked an elderly woman “Will I have to spend the entire war in hospital? I'd like to go somewhere.” She replied that there had been Czech and Polish army units set up in the USSR. What would I do among Poles and Czechoslovakians? I was a Yugoslav. She replied that she hadn't heard about any Yugoslav units. I

thought and thought about what to do. I wrote to the Yugoslav Embassy in Moscow, without knowing how things actually stood. I received a reply from Moscow that there was a Yugoslav unit which I could join and that I should round up anyone else who also wanted to join. I was relieved: thank God! Twenty of us set off from the Romanian Camp Oranki to Tesnicko near Kolomna, where the Yugoslav Partisan unit was. As far as I could see there was one battalion in training there. Because I was a lieutenant in the Yugoslav Army reserves, I became company commander. In April 1944 we received orders to transfer to the First Yugoslav Tank Brigade, which had been formed in the USSR. There I was promoted to assistant brigade chief. I was in this post until the end of the war. The brigade came to Yugoslavia on March 24, 1945. I took part in the breakthrough of the Srem front on April 12 and won battles to get through to Zagreb and Trieste where the state of war had ended.”

LADISLAV LOŠIĆ, pensioner

“I was in labour gang number 105/11. We were drilled in Bačka Topola for a month so that we would learn Hungarian commands. The company was then moved to Bilke, in the occupied part of Slovakia. We worked in a quarry, doing the worst kind of physical labour. And how did we do? Of the two hundred in the company, only four of us survived. We were at the eastern front on September 23, 1942, in a place called Ilinče. Our last commander was Laszlo Vay, lieutenant, who in civilian life had been the director of the Szegedin hemp spinning mill. We were escorted by 26 soldiers. There are no words to describe the way they beat and tortured us. And not just torture: they killed as well. The ones they spared died of typhus in the Soviet Union. Very few of our men lived to see the liberation. Those who were forced to retreat were killed by the Fascists because they were in the way. Squad leader Andras Bercsek from Szegedin, farm number 108, told me that he had overheard the officers saying that all Jews from the labour gangs were to be liquidated.

“On October 24, 1942, I decided to cross the frozen Don River to the Soviet side with three friends. The Soviet units weren’t far away. We listened and heard that when the guards challenged they replied with a password and with that “ours” which they use. When the Red Army soldier stopped us, when he asked “who’s coming?” I shouted “ours”. I reported to the Slavyansk camp as a Yugoslav Army reserve lieutenant, but then I was called in by the Soviet commander who told me that they couldn’t keep me in the camp because of what I was. Instead, they would transfer me as an interpreter to a camp for captured Germans and there I spent eleven months. Because the formation of Yugoslav Partisan units in the Soviet Union had begun, I submitted an application and was accepted into our tank brigade as chief quartermaster. We were given new uniforms and sewed the badges of Partisan officer and non-commissioned officer ranks onto our sleeves. I remember that in Moscow we were on a tram and the people were looking at us. We heard the Soviet officers talking among themselves, wondering who the three of us (Đurde Kesler, Nestor Bordoški from Senta and I) could be, whether we were British, American or Polish, to whose army we belonged. When he heard this, Nestor Bordoški stood up and walked over to the Soviet officers saying “we are Tito’s officers, we are Yugoslav Partisans!” Then came the hugging and kissing, we were simply besieged by the Soviet officers, they asked us to go with them to their headquarters to celebrate and just wouldn’t take no for an answer. We were guests in their headquarters, not just for an ordinary visit, but for a whole day.

[...]

“When the brigade arrived in Yugoslavia, I had already passed through Sombor a number of times, even during the war, that was when I met my future wife. It was now that I heard what had happened to the Sombor Jews and that my parents had also died with them. While I was in the Soviet Union I had enquired, I had even asked our general, Velimir Terzić who headed the Yugoslav Military Mission, but he couldn’t tell me anything certain about the fate of the Jews in Bačka. He mentioned, however, that he did know what had happened to the

Jews in Belgrade and so it became more clear to me what had happened and what I could expect. My forebodings proved true: our families had perished.

[...]

“Many years passed and I had never managed to reach Szegedin to enquire about the fate of our squad leader, Andras Bercsek, whether he was still alive or had died. He was a decent man who enjoyed the confidence of those of us in the labour camp. On one of those critical days, Dr Volf from Novi Sad gave him his watch. The squad leader told him that his watch would wait for him in Szegedin, at his farm, number 108. Dr Volf would never go to collect the watch, he was killed. But if the watch was saved, may it stay in the squad leader’s family as an extraordinary memento!”

DEZIDER KENIGSBERG, pensioner

“I was mobilised on July 1, 1942, into labour company number 105/13. From Bačka Topola we were driven to Erdelj, to Holmožd, where we quarried stone and mended roads. We were there for about three months. We arrived in Kosice and from there we were sent to the eastern front, always under the *Honved* guard at all times. Our commander was a Lieutenant Reinhard. There were no more than fifteen men in the military escort. Our company stayed in the occupied part of the Soviet Union, in Nikolayevka, about five or six kilometres from the Don. I worked as a blacksmith and shod horses until the Germans were defeated at Stalingrad. After this everything was in general chaos again. The next day, fourteen of us fled the company. The platoon sergeant, Veres, was also with us. We fled to Dimitriyevka, because I thought that there I would meet my brother Šandor from 105/14.

We ran and ran, wandering around the Russian steppe for seventeen days. In fact we were going round in circles. Snow, cold, blizzards. Whenever we stopped in the evening, we’d realise we’d already been there. In some warehouse, or whatever it was. And so we came across the village of Siroka. Empty, houses abandoned: only in the last house did we find a woman. Then we noticed that soldiers were passing through the village,

fleeing. A Hungarian major-general burst into the house. We weren't indifferent to this: we became really frightened. Sergeant Veres explained to the general that we were on the move, that we had only taken shelter for a short while, but it was also obvious to us that the general had escaped from his unit in an attempt to find shelter until the Russian troops arrived. We weren't starving at this time. We had two horses, and so... We also managed to get our hands on some weapons. Russian soldiers from the Red Army arrived on February 1, 1943. Two of them, like an advance reconnaissance party. They went from house to house. We reported as fugitives. The Russian landlady in whose house we were living confirmed this.



1964 photograph of the Sombor Jewish Community management, including Dezider Kenigsberg (first from left), Ladislav Lošić (fifth from left) and Zoltan Brajer (first right)

On the third day the advance echelons of the Russian Army arrived. They gave us instructions about which direction we should head. We were accommodated in a *kolkhoz* surrounded by a barbed wire fence. This was probably also a camp when the Germans were advancing. I spent three days in this camp. I and another four fugitives were then called out from a

list which had been drawn up earlier. So, from having been a persecuted Jewish fugitive from 105/13 company, I was now transformed into a Russian soldier, a member of the Red Army. I ended up in the 108th Soviet Bridge-Building Battalion, but before that I spent a month in a mortar platoon. The battalion was heading towards Kiev under the command of Major Pitoshen, or perhaps his name was Petar or Pyotr. I was given a Red Army uniform after six months. In May 1945 we stopped in a place in Germany called Landsberg am Warthe about eighty kilometres from Berlin.

In October, 1945, I was demobilised from the Red Army and returned to Sombor. There I heard about the tragedy and the dreadful fate of the Sombor Jews. Of my immediate family I was the only one who had survived. In the German concentration camps the Fascists had killed my father, five sisters and two brothers who had been driven off to Prague. As far as I was able to establish, of the 210 Jews from 105/13 company, only three of us survived: Miško Geviric, Eugen Daniel and I.